

Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Shirley R. Watkins
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for the

**Healthy School Nutrition Environments:
Promoting Healthy Eating
Press Conference**

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Good morning, and thank you, Dr. Bagley (President, American Academy of Family Physicians), for that kind introduction.

Someone once said:

“A pessimist is someone who complains about the noise when opportunity knocks.”

We are all here today because we have heard the knocking of opportunity to change our children’s lives for the better, and because we truly believe that this is not only possible, but imperative. I am looking forward to hearing from each of our distinguished guests as they help us outline a plan and a philosophy for taking full advantage of the chance to improve our school nutrition environment.

Using sound research and information, USDA has succeeded in making school meals conform to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. This was a crucial step and one that was absolutely essential in the process of providing a healthy environment for our children. However, when we took this step, we knew that it would only apply to those meals and foods over which we had control – not the other increasingly wide variety of foods in snack bars, school stores, and vending machines. We have principals selling pizza, candy sold by parents and teachers, and vending machines

operated for profit by student organizations to finance extra-curricular activities. The foods sold in these locations are becoming increasingly important sources of revenue for schools that are hard-pressed to provide all the activities and services demanded by students, parents, and the community. In addition, exclusive school-wide pouring rights contracts as well as pressure on foodservice programs to generate revenue above the cost of the meals are escalating. Unfortunately, professional school foodservice directors are often judged not by how kids fare in the dining room, but by how much revenue they are able to generate.

Because of inadequate cafeteria space and tight schedules, many schools start serving lunch as early as 10:00 AM or as late as 1:30 PM, providing as little as 20 minutes to eat. Cafeteria lines are rushed, and children have no time to make healthy choices – presuming they're even available – much less try new things. There are schools where unrealistic and inappropriate rules exist to moderate noise – kids being told to eat in silence, traffic lights that monitor noise levels and buzz when things get too loud. Mealtimes are not just for eating – this is important social and relaxation time, and absurd restrictions such as those I've described may be right for a penitentiary, but they certainly don't belong in a school!

There was a time when state and local policies ensured adequate time and space for students to enjoy lunch as a social meal. Those same policies also limited the sale of foods which competed with school meals, but it's clear that those safeguards have become diluted or ignored.

I think we can safely say that most children understand that there is a connection between good nutrition and good health. However, when they

make food choices, either at school or elsewhere, they aren't putting that knowledge to use.

- Studies show that only two percent of all children have eating patterns that conform to sound dietary guidelines.
- Forty-five percent of elementary school children eat less than one serving of fruit, and twenty percent less than one serving of vegetables on any given day.
- More than one-half do not meet the recommended number of servings of grains.
- Only nineteen percent of girls between the ages of 9 and 19 meet their calcium requirement, yet milk consumption continues to decline and the consumption of soft drinks, fruit drinks and fruit-ades increases.
- Two-thirds of children eat more fat than is recommended.
- And, 4.7 million children between the ages of 6 and 17 are overweight.

Taken together, these factors contribute to the incidence of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and other diet-related conditions which ultimately affect future health care costs and the general quality of life.

It is in our schools that opportunity exists to teach students healthful eating skills in the cafeteria, and in the classroom. Those lessons must be

reinforced by consistent messages everywhere on the school campus. There is no point in teaching sound nutrition in the classroom, if the rest of the school environment presents conflicting and contradictory messages. Our schools should be a “nutrition safe zone” where there are only healthy nutritional choices for our children.

Medical professionals can influence policy and practice in schools and communities, and the scientific community can be a real instrument for change. I hear that there isn’t enough comprehensive nutrition education offered in the classroom. State standards actually require very little, and what is offered is frequently knowledge-based, and not behavior-based. And more often than we’d like to admit, teachers are not adequately prepared to teach nutrition.

And researchers wonder if all this has anything to do with the staggering increases in childhood obesity.

In closing, I’d like to read quotes from two books by Emma Smedley and Mary DeGarmo Bryan, written in 1930 and 1936. Spanning the Great Depression, both were written when there were thousands of programs around the country, put in place because there was local concern for children’s nutrition as well as a commitment to fund them and see that they were properly administered. And both were written because there was a need for promising practices to be shared and replicated. We knew then what was needed for our children, and we knew what kind of programs and safeguards were important. We need to ask ourselves – what has happened???

“The program should be closely linked with the work of the classroom and operated in cooperation with medical and health services.”

We need to go back to that.

“A great opportunity to accommodate children with different ethnic backgrounds and provide them the opportunity to learn about other cultures.”

We should go back to that.

“Space and equipment would be provided by the school board as for any other school activity.”

We have to go back to that.

“It should be considered both as a business and one with a social aspect.”

*We **must** go back to that.*

Let us all make sure that we don't turn a deaf ear to opportunity as it knocks this time. We cannot allow ourselves to be uninvolved, unconcerned, or pessimistic when it comes to the issue of creating a healthy school environment for every child in this country. Our children deserve the best.